

Teaching ‘correct’ Latin in late antique Rome

Roman grammatici taught formal registers of Latin language through reading Latin poets. By late antiquity, there was an ever widening gap between ‘correct’ formal Latin and the language which students used in daily contexts. Equally, the texts used in schools were centuries old and written in highly contrived literary registers. In addition, students at even the most traditional and elite schools in Rome may well have come from all over the empire, and were not necessarily native Latin speakers. One grammaticus, the late antique teacher and writer Servius (fl. 390-410), has left a vast commentary which indicates some of the approaches he used in teaching ‘correct’ Latin usage. We can tell, from his commentary, the linguistic difficulties his students seem to have encountered with Latin.

In this paper, I examine how Servius addressed multiple purposes: reading Latin verse, daily communication and ‘correct’ formal Latin. I show instances in which Servius addresses students of differing linguistic backgrounds, although he only uses the target language in his Commentary, and perhaps in his classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The earliest evidence of schoolteachers in the Roman world dates back to the early first century BCE, but the majority of more detailed evidence is late antique, from the fourth and fifth centuries CE. For this later period, Kaster's prosopography provides evidence of schoolteachers throughout the empire in a wide variety of urban and more rural locations (Kaster 1988). Nonetheless, these schoolteachers, particularly those known to us as *grammatici*, taught the Latin language through reading Latin poetry. However, they were interested in teaching a particular form and register of Latin. This register was distinct from the everyday Latin which speakers of the language would have used in informal contexts. In this article, I have termed this variety of Latin 'correct', not because it was an absolute, unchanging and established norm, but because it was the desired linguistic variant which teachers promoted, and which parents paid for their children to acquire. By the fourth century, there was an ever widening gap between this idea of 'correct' Latin and the language which students would have used in daily contexts. On the other hand, the texts that were used to teach from were centuries old, and written in highly contrived literary registers, quite different to both conversational Latin and the 'correct' register of Latin which teachers were aiming to teach. In addition, we know that, at even the most traditional and elite schools in Rome, students may well have come from all over the empire, and were not necessarily native Latin speakers (Foster 2017). Thus, these students would have been learning Latin as an additional language for various purposes, requiring distinct registers: daily communication, 'correct' Latin for formal, public situations, and reading verse. Although Latin was the language of instruction, I read the late antique classroom as a multilingual environment through the different registers of Latin which formed part of the curriculum. These multilingual registers include the standard Latin for conversations which students gained through instruction in the language, the 'correct' Latin which they were learning for formal written and spoken communication, and also the literary

Latin verse which they were learning to read (but not imitate). These last two would have been additional languages for all students, regardless of their home language background. But for many, even the first was probably an additional language, since they may have spoken other languages (even including distinct regional variants of Latin) at home. Although information about the home languages of students is scarce, we have considerable information about the linguistic backgrounds of the educated and literate group in late antiquity. This group was very diverse, since these individuals came from all over the empire, and thus their home languages included Punic, Aramaic, Berber, Germanic, and — for those originating from the eastern provinces — koine Greek (Adams 2004). Adams points out that there is abundant evidence for speakers of other languages learning Latin, but not for the reverse (2004, 293). Native Latin speakers did not appear to learn languages other than formal Latin and formal Attic Greek.

One *grammaticus*, the late antique teacher and writer Maurus Servius Honoratus, has left a vast commentary which can indicate some of the approaches he used in teaching what was perceived as ‘correct’ Latin usage. Servius lived in Rome sometime between (at the very broadest) 354 and 430 CE, as Philip Bruggisser (1999) and Alan Cameron (1966, 2011) have demonstrated. He was probably engaged in writing his *Commentary* somewhere between 390 and 420, and Charles Murgia (2003) has suggested that the *Commentary* must have been completed by 410. Servius worked as a *grammaticus* in Rome, where he taught literature, including Virgil’s poetry, to the sons of the elite in the city. From his *Commentary*, we can tell some of the linguistic difficulties his students seem to have encountered with Virgil’s Latin. Servius frequently defines the meaning of words which were either archaic, or simply not known to those students whose native language was not Latin. He explains unfamiliar phrases and expressions, and clarifies Virgil’s syntax and word order at points where it seems that students misunderstood the meaning. I show how Servius distinguishes between those features which belong to Virgil’s stylistic choices, but are not suitable for students to use, and those expressions they should employ in their own work, both spoken and written. Thus I demonstrate how Servius operated with three registers of language in

his classroom: Virgil's literary verse, the formal Latin used by the educated elite, and the informal and regionalised register of everyday conversation spoken by a diverse and multilingual student body. In this paper, I analyse specific passages in Servius's *Commentary* to examine how Servius addressed multiple purposes, daily communication and using 'correct' formal Latin. In addition, I also demonstrate how he helps students to understand Virgil's own linguistic use, since he frequently treats Virgil's poetic register as a different type of language, which students should understand but not imitate. I show instances in which Servius addresses students of differing linguistic abilities and backgrounds, although he only uses the target language in his *Commentary*, and perhaps in his classroom.

Servius is identified as the author of a long and detailed commentary covering all of Virgil's poems, starting with the *Aeneid*, and he is also identified as the author of four grammatical treatises, the *Commentary on the Grammar of Donatus*, *On a Hundred Poetic Metres*, *On Metrical Endings*, and *On Horace's Metres*. However, I must note here that Servius's *Commentary* has reached us in two distinct forms: the text thought to be Servius's own (often known as the S-text), and an expanded form (often known as the D-text), a version thought to have been created in the 8th century by interweaving Servius's *Commentary* with another late antique commentary (Marshall 1983). As my focus here is on Servius in particular as a late antique practitioner, I only refer to the text so far identified as Servius's own, according to the nineteenth century edition of the whole corpus by Thilo and Hagen (1881), the twentieth century so-called 'Harvard Servius' (*Aeneid* 1-2: Rand et al 1946 and *Aeneid* 3-5: Stocker and Travis 1965), the recent Budé edition of *Aeneid* 6 (Jeunet-Mancy 2012), and Murgia's edition of *Aeneid* 9-12 (2018). In accordance with standard practice, I have used small capitals to indicate the lemmata from Virgil's text on which Servius comments. However, until a full critical edition of the whole text becomes available, it is hard to be certain that all the layers of texts have been fully identified. Charles Murgia has warned that neither Thilo and Hagen's edition nor the two twentieth century volumes of the 'Harvard Servius' may be considered fully reliable in their separation of the layers of texts

(Murgia 2018).

‘CORRECT’ LATIN?

I have described the variety of Latin which Servius aimed to teach students to use as ‘correct’ Latin, but this requires some further clarification. The form of Latin that is nowadays most commonly taught at schools and universities is termed classical Latin. [As Pat Easterling](#) has observed, the adjective ‘classical’ is a value-term, implying ‘best’, but often indicating a version that is both traditional and elite, based on nineteenth century concepts (2006, 21). The Latin adjective *classicus*, *classica*, *classicum* was used to refer to the ‘highest class of citizens’ (Glare 2012, 365), those who were wealthiest and therefore socially superior. However, Aulus Gellius also applies the word to literary authors, ‘vel oratorum aliquis vel poetarum, id est classicus assiduusque aliquis scriptor, non proletarius’ (‘someone from either the orators or the poets, that is some [‘classical’ and ‘upper class’ writer](#), not lowest class’) (19.8.15). Gellius juxtaposes the adjective *classicus* with a similar adjective *assiduus*, a word usually indicating the wealthy land-owning class (Glare 2012, 206), and contrasting both ideas with *proletarius* which describes the lowest class of citizens. Schein argues that the historical source of the modern terms with the elitism built into them arose when Gellius transferred social hierarchies to literature by describing literary merit with words derived from social stratification (1999, 288-9). However, Gellius articulates a hierarchy already present in the ancient world, namely that command of a certain register of literary language was another way of demonstrating social superiority.

Hannah Rosén has charted the development of what we call Classical Latin, defining it as, in essence, the literary language of Cicero. She argues that this type of Latin depends for details on the writings of individuals, and is not reflective of the language used by the majority, even by those who were educated (Rosén 1999, 18). In addition, Nigel Vincent has pointed out that classical Latin is a ‘concept based on register and style as much as on linguistic structure’, rather

than a phase in the development of the language or a location within its regional variations. It is therefore a language based on ‘social class and education’ (diastratic) as well as ‘register and context’ (diaphasic) (Adams and Vincent 2016, 5). Therefore, this [form](#) of Latin was not the language used by native speakers in daily contexts, even in Cicero’s time. It had to be learnt, and students would have had to be trained to read and compose in this register. Dirk Panhuis has argued that classical Latin constitutes a separate and conservative register, while ‘the normal evolution of Latin goes on in the colloquial register’ (1984, 156). Knowledge of this conservative register of Latin played no part in everyday life and as such held no direct practical value — rather it was a luxury commodity. Since the educational process by which these skills could be acquired was an expensive business, it was only available to wealthy social groups who were able to afford such an education. These people could thereby strengthen their own social status by displaying their skills in this linguistic register, demonstrating their command of ‘classical’ Latin, and thereby also their membership of the highest social and economic classes.

The gap between an accepted linguistic standard and common usage had become greater by late antiquity. These changes are likely to have been both geographical and chronological, even if the details are difficult to trace. Clackson and Horrocks have noted that surviving texts were not written ‘reflecting the way people spoke, but the way they were taught to write’, and that the continued existence of a ‘prestigious standard’ in writing makes it more difficult to track linguistic changes (2007, 265). Changes to the sounds and quantities of vowels had gradually taken place, as well as shifts in syntax and vocabulary. [Clackson and Horrocks show that the varieties of languages spoken in western Europe were not formally recognised as distinct languages until much later, citing an example from the end of the tenth century \(2007, 267\).](#) Adams has charted regional variations in Latin across the Roman world, from the Republic through to the late empire. He proposes that, because Rome maintained a linguistic centrality for educated social classes outside the city, ‘Roman Latin was treated as an ideal standard, and there is evidence that the standard was imitated by outsiders’ (Adams 2007, 188). He suggests

that educated native Latin speakers from elsewhere in the Roman world wanted to reproduce the sounds and features of Roman Latin to the extent that they could conceal their provincial origins (2007, 189). He cites examples from late antique authors, such as the *Panegyrici Latini*, Pacatus and Augustine, who acknowledge (or pretend to acknowledge) a difference between their provincial speech in comparison to a standard Roman accent.

Servius's contemporary Augustine (354-430 CE), originally from north Africa, was highly educated in the register of classical Latin. However, in 386, after he had been living in Milan for some months while working as a teacher of rhetoric, he wrote:

me enim ipsum, cui magna necessitas fuit ista perdiscere, adhuc in multis uerborum sonis Itali exagitant.

For myself — there was a great necessity on me to learn these things [expression and pronunciation] thoroughly, and the Italians still criticise me on many sounds of words.

(Augustine, *De Ordine*, 2.17.45)

The word *adhuc* (still) implies that, despite making an effort to imitate the 'correct' Roman accent, Augustine found it difficult to do so effectively, even in Milan. By contrast, Servius's school was located in Rome, and thus it was situated in the historical and cultural centre of the empire, where provincials might imagine the best Latin was spoken. Even though Servius's students would have come from wealthy and elite families, many of them would have been exposed to nonstandard linguistic features of accent and dialect, both from household slaves and from their local home region if they were not from Rome. Such variations would have meant that the task of ensuring students' command of 'correct' Latin was even more important for the *grammaticus* of late antiquity. Since the varieties of language on the school curriculum were literary, and not representative of the language in everyday use, all students were being

taught to use standard speech (the ‘correct’ Latin for formal situations), as well as to recognise literary linguistic forms no longer in use to enable them to read literary texts. As a result, *grammatici* would have needed to adjust their teaching to meet their students’ competencies in Latin as the language of instruction, but taking account of the multilingual registers of Latin which were the core of the curriculum.

LEARNING IN THE ANCIENT CLASSROOM

In order to examine the ways in which Servius taught language, it is important to understand how Roman classrooms operated. Neither progression nor achievement were formalised. Thus, students could stay in a school for as long as their parents and teachers felt it was useful, and Roman schools contained students of different ages and levels within the same classroom. Some surviving late antique bilingual dialogues, known as the *Colloquia*, can give us some idea about how learning took place in classrooms. [Dickey suggests that the school sections of the *Colloquia* were probably composed in the Latin speaking west before the first century BCE. They were copied, used and adapted in subsequent centuries throughout the Roman world \(2012, 51\).](#) These dialogues were probably ancient language teaching materials, and they contain some scenes set in a school, narrated from a child’s point of view, showing a wide range of student interaction and learning. They describe various groups of students engaged in different activities, involving a full range of language skills, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing.

ἄλλοι οὖν ὀνόματα, ἄλλοι στίχους ἀνηγόρευσαν, καθὼς εἰώθασιν γράφειν. ἡγέρθησαν καὶ ἐστάθησαν πρὸς τὸν πίνακα. ἤδη ἐμπεῖω οἱ λοιποὶ ὁμοῦ ἀπεκρίνοντο.

alii ergo nomina, alii versus recitaverunt, quomodo soliti sunt scribere. surrexerunt et steterunt ad titulum. iam perito reliqui pariter respondebant.

Some recited nouns, others verses, at the level they are accustomed to write them. They rose and stood at the board. The others were in the same way answering one who was already experienced.

(*Colloquium Stephani*, 20a-21a, [translation mine](#))

In this extract, students are shown working both individually and in groups, and sometimes younger students are shown working with older students guiding them. At various points, all students interact directly with the teacher, asking questions or demonstrating their work for feedback. Servius's comments need to be read within this context, where Virgil's text can be used as a vehicle to teach beginner, intermediate and advanced students at the same time. In another scene, the *Colloquia* state explicitly that students need to be familiar with everyday language usage:

τριβὴ καθημερινὴ ὀφείλει δοθῆναι πᾶσιν τοῖς παισίν, τοῖς μικροῖς καὶ τοῖς μείζουσιν, ἐπειδὴ ἀναγκαῖά εἰσιν.

usus cottidianus debet dari omnibus pueris, minoribus et maioribus, quoniam necessaria sunt.

everyday usage ought to be given to all children, younger and older, since they are necessary skills.

(*Colloquia Monacensia–Einsidlensia*, 3b)

Everyday usage is distinguished from the literary language of the poets, whose study is described elsewhere in the *Colloquia*. In another scene, the student narrator describes practising pronunciation:

καὶ προσέσχον ὑποκρίσεις καθηγητοῦ καὶ συμμαθητοῦ. ... ἐν ὧσ' ἀποδίδωμι «ἐδιορθώθην» ὑπὸ τοῦ καθηγητοῦ, ἵνα καὶ φωνὴν ἐτοιμασαίμην ἐγγυτέραν.

et attendi pronuntiationes praeceptoris, et condiscipuli. ... dum reddo <emendatus sum> a praeceptore, ut et vocem praepararem propiorem.

and I paid attention to the pronunciations of my teacher, and fellow student. ...

While I was reciting <I was corrected> by the teacher, so that I would also develop a more proper speech.

(*Colloquium Stephani*, 11c, 14a-b)

The narrator experiences correction by the teacher, presumably because learning correct accent was not always easy for Roman children. Dickey suggests that the phrase ‘φωνὴν ἐγγυτέραν | vocem propiorem’ might be understood as ‘a faculty of speaking closer [to the standard]’ (2012, 228), further supporting the idea that students needed to learn a particular register of spoken Latin in accent and pronunciation. Although the *Colloquia* seem to have been designed for learning another language, the school scenes make no explicit mention of foreign language teaching in the classroom, and it is likely that similar activities would have been practised in Latin only classrooms. Since even Latin only classrooms would have contained students who spoke other languages at home, many of these skills would have been important for them as well. In addition, the registers of ‘correct’ Latin and literary Latin which they were required to learn would have been so different from the Latin which students spoke at home that such instruction may not have been dissimilar from foreign language learning.

As Robert Kaster has observed, a *grammaticus* such as Servius needed to provide students ‘with a firm grasp of correct Latinity’ (Kaster 1978, 182). However, for Servius this task is twofold, given the distance between his students’ home languages, Virgil’s poetic literary Latin and the formal ‘correct’ Latin of his own day. Servius aims to teach both registers, which potentially might lead to what Raymond Starr has termed a ‘pedagogical problem’. Starr argues that Servius is both a teacher of Latinity and also a ‘transmitter of a cultural heritage’ which includes canonical texts. Thus, Servius ‘needs to provide his students with models’ of correct

Latinity which are ‘useful in the real world’. At the same time, he also needs to ensure that ‘his students revere Virgil as one of the cornerstones of education and culture’ (Starr 2007, 962). These two things are not mutually exclusive, of course, but the issue is that the model — Virgil’s text — is written in one linguistic register, while the desired Latin of the time was a very different register. Servius does address both pedagogical aims, but the primary difference between the two is that the first (using correct Latin) is concerned with teaching active use of the language for formal occasions, while the second (reading Virgil) aims to teach passive understanding of literary texts. This dual linguistic purpose creates a multilingual classroom, since neither linguistic register is students’ native mode. Therefore, Servius needs to show students how to express themselves appropriately, while also making sure that they understand Virgil’s language, without requiring them to imitate it. Servius’s students need to gain both the linguistic capital of the correct formal Latin of the day as well as the cultural capital of being able to read and understand Virgil’s language and poetry. They can only show themselves to be members of that elite group if they accomplish both aims.

READING VIRGIL’S POETIC REGISTER

Servius’s students, whether or not they were native Latin speakers, found Virgil’s text difficult. They struggled with vocabulary, word order, idiom and archaic syntax, among other aspects — many of the same problems that modern British students encounter when reading Shakespeare. To give an indication of some of the types of comprehension difficulties that Servius’s students appeared to encounter when reading Virgil’s text, I will begin with an example from *Aeneid* 1. During Virgil’s description of the chaotic storm which shipwrecks the Trojans on the coast of Libya, Servius comments on Virgil’s word order:

SAXA VOCANT ITALI MEDIIS QUAE IN FLUCTIBUS ARAS ordo est, ‘quae saxa in mediis fluctibus Itali aras vocant’.

THE ITALIANS CALL THE ROCKS, WHICH ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WAVES, THE ALTARS The order is, 'these rocks in the middle of the waves, the Italians call them the Altars.'

(Servius, *Aeneid* 1.109)

Servius uses the phrase 'ordo est' (the order is) whenever the unusual word order of Virgil's verse potentially obscures the meaning. On this occasion, Servius separates the main clause (the Italians call these rocks the Altars) from the sub clause (the rocks are in the middle of the waves). This probably arose from student confusion, since the two clauses overlap in Virgil's verse, where the relative pronoun (*quae*) is separated from its noun (*saxa*, rocks). Servius often needs to clarify when words which agree with each other are not positioned together. It is likely that in these instances, students took the words in the order in which they appeared in the text, and as a result found it difficult to match up adjectives, nouns and pronouns. Such clarifications are quite common, and it is likely that noticing agreement when the words were separated was a problem for native Latin speaking students, as well as those from other linguistic backgrounds. Although spoken Latin word order tended to follow a subject-verb-object pattern (Adams 1976), classical literary Latin prefers subject-object-verb. Servius models the 'correct' classical pattern in his rephrasing of the main clause 'Itali aras vocant' (the Italians call them the Altars) for his students to imitate, since this would have been different to their native spoken idiom.

On another occasion, this time in *Aeneid* 2, the prophet Laocoön warns the Trojans that the Greeks have not really left, and that the giant wooden horse is not a friendly present. Once again, Servius focuses on word order:

DONA CARERE DOLIS DANAVM? ordo est 'dona Danaum', non 'dolis Danaum'.

THE GIFTS OF THE GREEKS LACK GUILF? The order is, 'the gifts of the Greeks', not 'the guile of the Greeks'.

Servius's explicit correction here indicates that his students were probably taking the words in the order in which they were written, since the genitive *Danaum* (of the Greeks) is separated from the noun *dona* (gifts) with which it should be taken. There is no indication in Servius's comment that students failed to recognise that the verb *careo* (I lack) takes an ablative (in this case, *dolis*, cunning). Although Servius makes no further comment on Virgil's style on this line, a reader skilled in word patterning might see how the word order mimics the Greeks' trickery of hiding inside the horse, since the word for cunning is visually placed inside the gifts of the Greeks.

Servius at times highlights when Virgil uses words or syntax in a manner appropriate to verse. In *Aeneid* 8, Virgil uses the word *terna* to describe special armour that allowed the wearer to be killed three times in battle before finally dying.

TERNA ARMA MOVENDA figura poetica, nam 'trina' debuit dicere. 'arma' enim numeri sunt tantum pluralis. 'movenda' autem vel contra ipsum, vel ab ipso.

THREEFOLD ARMOUR TO BE WORN It's a poetic figure, for in prose he would have said 'triple'. The word 'armour' is only counted in the plural. But 'to be worn', either on himself in the accusative, or by himself in the ablative.

(Servius, *Aeneid* 8.565)

Servius points out first that this is a poetic figure of speech, but he then continues to describe which word Virgil '*debuit dicere*' (would have said) if he had been writing prose. Servius requires his students to understand the word *terna* in the context of Virgil's verse, but he also makes clear that this is not a word they should imitate, and provides them with the appropriate synonym which they should use. He follows this up with a reminder to students that *arma* (armour) is a plural word in Latin (like 'trousers', which is plural in English, but singular in

German, for example). Since the word *arma* is very common in Virgil's text, this may well be a reminder directed at students whose native language was not Latin, since they would find such a detail more difficult to remember, as nonnative speakers of English may forget that the word 'trousers' is a plural word when it describes a single item of clothing. Servius ends with a comment on the gerundive *movenda*, which is not related to students' passive understanding of the meaning in Virgil's text. Rather, he shows students two ways in which they can use the verb correctly to describe wearing clothing. Servius demonstrates each use with both a preposition and the appropriate case of *ipse* (himself).

Late antique idiom preferred to indicate the relationship between words by using prepositions, rather than just cases, and Servius frequently comments on Virgil's use of cases since it was different to the 'correct' Latin usage he was instilling in his students (Foster 2017, 276). When Virgil describes a painting which shows Troilus running from Achilles, Servius comments on Virgil's expression, distinguishing it from current usage. The scene comes from the first book of the *Aeneid*, and from our knowledge of the way epics were read in schools in antiquity (Cribiore 2009, 329), it is likely that most students in Servius's school would read this book more than once, both at the start of their school career and later re-read it. Servius draws his students' attention to Virgil's use of the dative with the verb *congregior* (I combat), rather than using a preposition with the ablative:

CONGRESSUS ACHILLI congregior tibi antiqui dicebant, sicut pugno tibi, dimico tibi.
hodie dicimus congregior tecum, pugno tecum, dimico tecum.

COMBAT WITH ACHILLES the ancients used to say 'I combat you' in the dative, like 'I fight you', 'I confront you' in the dative. Today we say 'I undertake combat with you', 'I fight with you', 'I have a confrontation with you' using the preposition 'with'.

(Servius, *Aeneid* 1.475)

Servius gives three examples of the ways in which the 'ancients' expressed themselves using the

dative after the verb, even though Virgil only uses one verb in this line. He labels this use of verbs with the dative archaic, rather than poetic, but he nonetheless indicates that these are phrases that his students need to recognise, rather than employ. He supplies three examples of the ways his students should express themselves with the same verbs, using a preposition with the ablative. In the examples I showed earlier, Servius had to clarify Virgil's meaning which could have been obscured by unfamiliar word order. This is not the case in this verse or the previous, where the meaning is clear, even if Virgil's expression might have felt unusual or archaic. Adams notes some of the difficulties less competent Greek learners of Latin experienced with Latin inflections and cases (2004, [765](#)). It is possible that Servius provides these multiple examples of expressions using verbs with prepositions and cases for those students whose native language is not Latin, since they would require such usage to be modelled for them. However, even for native Latin speaking students, Servius indicates how they may broaden their vocabulary, while using these expressions 'correctly' according to the formal Latin of his own day.

When Virgil uses the word *bini* (pair, a plural word) to describe the present of a couple of bridles or bits which Evander received from Anchises, Servius needs to explain the word:

FRENAQUE BINA poetice, nam 'duo' debuit dicere: 'bina' enim secundum Ciceronem non dicuntur nisi de his quae sunt numeri tantum pluralis. nam Cicero per epistolam culpatur filium, dicens male eum dixisse 'direxi litteras duas', cum 'litterae', quotiens epistolam significant, numeri tantum pluralis sint. contra 'epistolas binas' non dicimus, sed 'duas'.

AND A PAIR OF BRIDLES It's said poetically, for in prose he would have said 'two'. According to Cicero, the word 'pair' is not said except about nouns which are only plural. For Cicero answers his son in a letter, saying that he should not have written 'I sent two letters', since 'litterae', whenever it means a [correspondence](#) letter, is only plural. On the other hand, we don't say 'a pair of letters', but 'two letters'.

He tells his students that this is a poetic register, since in prose he would have used the simple cardinal number *duo* (two), rather than the adjective. Servius quotes a letter by Cicero, which is only known through this fragment preserved by Servius, so we cannot see the context. However, he gives Cicero's advice to his son as an authority on 'correct' Latin, where Cicero advises that his son should have used the word *bini* when describing the plural Latin word *litterae* for [correspondence](#) letters (in the singular it means a letter of the alphabet, rather than a [correspondence](#) letter). His reminder that the word *litterae*, whenever it means a [correspondence](#) letter, is always plural may perhaps be directed to students whose native language was not Latin, as in the previous example of *arma*. Both *arma* and *litterae* continued to be used in mediaeval Latin (Niemeyer 1976, *arma*: 60 and *litterae*: 616) and the existence of derivatives from both in multiple European languages make it likely that the words were in regular use in late antiquity. Therefore, it is likely that those students whose native language was Latin would have been familiar with both words, while those who were learning Latin as an additional language may have struggled to remember the words are always plural. Servius points out that his students should not mix expressions, by using *bini* (pair) with a noun like *epistola* (letter), which forms a regular plural, as this is not in line with current practice: *non dicimus* (we don't say it). He finishes with the much more straightforward expression, namely the cardinal number with the word *epistola*, which can be used in the singular or plural.

VOCABULARY

Virgil sometimes uses unusual vocabulary which is archaic or rare, and Servius's students are unlikely to know. When the Trojans receive parting gifts from Helenus and Andromache, Virgil lists among the gifts 'cauldrons from Dodona'. The word he uses to describe the cauldrons, *lebes*, is a word of Greek origin, and Servius glosses it with the usual classical Latin word *olla*, to

indicate the type of vessel. The word *olla* is frequent in classical Latin authors, including those, such as Juvenal, that Servius uses as *exempla* of good practice.

LEBETAS ollas aereas. Graece dixit; zemas enim vulgare est, non Latinum.

CAULDRONS bronze pots. He said it in Greek, for it is ‘saucepans’ in ordinary speech, which is not correct Latin.

(Servius, *Aeneid* 3.466)

This comment is interesting on several layers. Firstly, this passage from the *Aeneid* is spoken by Aeneas, and Servius sometimes uses the phrase ‘he said it in Greek’ to remind his students that (from a late antique perspective) Trojans spoke Greek (Foster 2014, 298). Equally, Servius does not expect his students to understand much Greek beyond articles and prepositions, and therefore he always glosses and explains Greek words (Foster 2016). However, the word *lebes* appears as a Greek loan word in other late antique Latin texts: the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* records its use by Sidonius (*Carmina*, 5.227) and also notes several occasions on which it appears in Jerome’s *Vulgate* (TLL 7.2.1079). These texts are both too late for Servius’s students to have encountered them — Jerome only finished his translation by 405, roughly contemporary with Servius’s own composition, while Sidonius wrote over 50 years later. Nonetheless, it does suggest that the word may well have been known, either by students from a Greek speaking or a Christian background. However, Servius glosses the word not once, but twice, suggesting that he did not expect all his students to understand the classical Latin word *olla* either.

Instead, Servius adds another word, *zema*, for this type of vessel. This is actually a Greek loan word which does not appear in the [*Oxford Latin Dictionary*](#), but is in Souter’s supplementary *Glossary of Later Latin*, where it is listed as a fourth century word: ‘zema, ~ae and ~atis (ζέμα) decoction (Apicius); cooking-utensil, pan [saec. iv]’ (Souter 1949, 453). The word is also listed by Lewis and Short, where the three instances given (including Servius) are all late antique:

zěma or **zŭma**, ātis, *n.*, = ζέμα, *a cooking utensil, a saucepan*, Apicius 8.1.10; *Historia Augusta: Divus Claudius II Gothicus* 14.4; Servius, *Aeneid* 3.466.

(Lewis and Short 1879, 2018; references expanded)

The other two texts — Apicius’s cookery text and the problematic *Historia Augusta* — are not generally considered examples of good Latinity. Because they are not written in formal classical Latin, they can provide some indication of language use in everyday, probably conversational, contexts. Furthermore, Lewis and Short list *zema* as a third declension neuter noun, like its Greek equivalent, but instances of *zema* all three texts show that in Latin it has become a first declension feminine noun. Souter allows for both first and third declensions, but citing Apicius, who only uses it as a first declension noun. The *Historia Augusta* only contains the word *zema* once to indicate a fairly basic cooking pot, rather than the ornamental object Virgil describes. Apicius uses the word once to indicate a pot and once to mean a cooking sauce or stock. Isidore of Seville uses *zema* twice, indicating broth on both occasions, while listing both *olla* and *lebes* among the word for cooking pots. Uhl suggests that Isidore was influenced by Servius’s dismissal of the word as not correct Latin for a pot (1998, 354). The [Library of Latin Texts](#) database gives no further occurrences of the word.

The scarcity of written occurrences of the word *zema* suggests that it is likely that it barely entered written language, and did so only briefly and at a late date. It probably fell out of use sometime soon after late antiquity, since it does not have any [descendants](#) in Romance languages listed in Meyer-Lübke, nor is it listed in Niemeyer’s mediaeval Latin dictionary. Yet, it must have been used in spoken Latin at the turn of the fifth century, since Servius expects that his students will understand it. However, he warns them explicitly not to use it, since it is *vulgare*, not proper ‘correct’ Latin. Müller describes Servius’s phrase ‘*vulgare est, non Latinum*’ as a ‘divergent substandard from the classical norm’ (2001, 125). Uhl observes that Servius uses the word *zema* as a Latin rather than a foreign word, perceiving it as belonging to a lower linguistic

register, rather than to a different language (1998, 354). Servius generally writes in formal Latin, and frequently models the language that he expects his students to use. This instance is unusual, because for a moment he acknowledges an informal current spoken register of Latin, which was probably used for communication by students in the classroom, even if he does not approve of its use as ‘correct’ Latin.

REGIONAL VARIATION

At times, Servius demonstrates an awareness of regional variation in Virgil’s language. When Virgil describes a cloud of birds making a noise, Servius draws his students’ attention to the range of meanings which Virgil’s adjective ‘noisy’ conveys.

VOLUCRUM RAUCARUM ‘raucarum’ τῶν μέσων est, sicut ‘grave olens.’ nam legimus ‘graviter spirantis copia thymbrae.’ sciendum tamen Vergilium secundum morem provinciae suae locutum, in qua bene canentes cycni rauciores vocantur.

OF NOISY BIRDS ‘of noisy’ is not judgemental, just as ‘smelling strongly’. For we read ‘an abundance of strongly scented Cretan thyme’ (*Georgics*, 4.31). However, it must be known that Virgil speaks according to the manner of his province, in which swans singing well are called ‘noisier’.

(Servius, *Aeneid* 7.705)

Servius implies that the adjective *raucus* is not necessarily a negative description, just as smell can be both positive and negative. This information is to ensure that his students can grasp the sense of the original, and also so that they may understand how to use the words accurately themselves. However, Servius follows this up with the explanation that Virgil was using a regional variant in applying the word ‘noisy’ to birds in this way. Adams finds the linguistic details ‘unconvincing’, but notes that Servius displays an awareness of regional variations in

language (2007, 251). Regardless of Servius's historical and linguistic accuracy regarding the regional variations in Latin four hundred years earlier, he implies that speaking in a regional idiom, 'in the manner of your province' may be allowed to Virgil, but not to his students. They should not repeat localised linguistic peculiarities. Although we cannot know what kind of regional idioms Servius's students brought into the classroom, this comment suggests that he regularly encountered regional idioms in use among his students.

CONCLUSION

I have shown a range of ways in which Servius approached teaching a very particular register of formal Latin to students who, regardless of their individual linguistic backgrounds, did not speak this *register* of Latin as their native language, because such classical Roman Latin was not a colloquial norm. In addition, I have [demonstrated](#) how Servius taught this [register](#) of language through the medium of yet another linguistic register, Virgil's poetry. I have [shown](#) how Servius clarified meaning and distinguished between different linguistic registers, including archaic, poetic, regional and contemporary informal language, always with an eye to the register of 'correct' classical Latin of late antiquity. Although Latin was the language of instruction, I have shown how the [registers](#) of Latin in Servius's classroom, the target language of classical Latin, Virgil's literary poetry and students' native or acquired idiom function together to make the late antique Roman classroom a multilingual environment. Virgil's language was far removed from both late antique idiom and the register of formal Latin that Servius aimed to instil in students, so that reading the verse must have been very difficult for students. On the other hand, the frequent deviations in verse from the classical norm, the 'correct' ideal, must have made it difficult to use the text as a vehicle for teaching the formal register of late antiquity. Furthermore, for those students whose native language was not Latin, or whose native Latin was a [strongly accented regional and provincial dialect far removed from the desired standard](#),

the task must have been even more challenging, since they also needed to acquire a standard of conversational Latin for everyday use. However, it is important to see the moments I have described as part of Servius's classroom teaching, as exemplified through scenes from the *Colloquia*, where students practiced reading aloud, reciting from memory, composing short speeches, writing from dictation and writing their own prose. Late antique classrooms were noisy places, in which many of these activities could take place simultaneously in different corners of the schoolroom. Thus students would have heard (rather than read silently) multiple linguistic registers every day.

It may seem peculiar, at the very least, to use Virgil's verse as a medium by which to teach students how to use a very different linguistic register, the 'correct' formal Latin of late antiquity. However, this choice is not as perverse as it may seem at first. Learning to read Virgil's language would have been as important as learning to speak and write the formal register of Roman Latin. This is because of the status and prestige attached to certain registers of literary and formal language, in addition to the cultural capital conferred on those who have read the contents of the poet's work. This is the hierarchy which Gellius articulated, when he first applied the terms of social class to linguistic and literary registers. The linguistic variants which teachers promoted and parents paid for could not have been achieved without a detailed and thorough reading of texts that embodied those prestigious ideals.



6570 total word count [7365 including title and bibliography]

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